

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

A PUBLICATION OF THE WV PARTNERS IN FLIGHT WORKING GROUP

FALL, 2003

Randolph County Hummers Attract National Bird Banders

By Judith Stutler

How do you catch and band a hummingbird? With a tent made of fine black mesh, the toe section from a pair of pantyhose, a special pair of banding pliers, and numbered bird leg bands small enough to wrap around a size 2 knitting needle.

As nectar-filled feeders attract up to 50 ruby-throated hummingbirds at one time to Gerry Tuning's home near Montrose, the large number of "hummers" has attracted American volunteers affiliated with the Holiday Beach Migration Observatory based in Canada.

A group of the birders visited Tuning this past August to measure and band hummingbirds to learn more about the birds' migration, nesting habits, annual cycles and general population trends.

Tuning, originally from California, and her husband, the late Peck Tuning who retired from the National Weather Service and was a native of West Virginia, has lived near Montrose since 1976.

FALL PIF MEETING

When: Friday, October 24
Where: Opposum Creek Retreat (near Fayetteville)
Agenda: 9:30 am-- Social (*refreshments provided*)
10 am-- Welcome, announcements
11 am-- Guest Speaker
12:30-1:30pm-- Lunch
1:30-4-- Updates, reports, presentations

For more information contact: Rob Tallman, (304) 637-0245 or rtallman@dnr.state.wv.us.

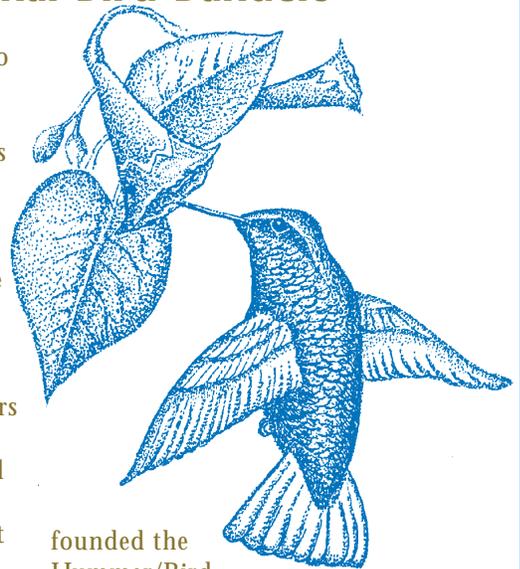
"My sister in California had two feeders and they fascinated me," Tuning said. "When I came back here from visiting, I put out feeders and the rest is history.

"When I stand among the feeders, the hummingbirds swarm all around and I can feel their little wings brushing me," she said. "If you're patient enough and place your fingers on the feeders' perches, they'll land on your fingers and eat."

With her rural home surrounded by 25 to 30 hummingbird feeders with "hummers" zipping in and out to feed, Tuning said she didn't decide to attract that many birds but said she is "tickled to death that I did." And her infatuation with the birds attracted those who love to study the small winged creatures.

Allen Chartier, project director of Michigan HummerNet, who said hummingbirds nest all over the eastern United States from southern Canada to Florida, met Tuning on an Internet chat room for hummingbird enthusiasts.

Discovering his interest in monitoring the birds, she invited him and his colleagues to study the hummers outside her home. "It's a great opportunity," Chartier said. "Some places in Michigan I can band only two or three birds in one yard." Others assisting were Bob Sargent of Clay, Ala., a recognized authority and author on hummingbirds, who with his wife, Martha,



founded the Hummer/Bird Study Group and who trained Chartier as a hummingbird bander; and HBMOP President Bob Hall-Brooks and member Carl Pascoe, both of Michigan, who are each learning to band hummingbirds.

Slated to participate later in the week were Scott Weidensaul of Pennsylvania, the author of "Living on the Wind," which was one of three

Hummingbirds have a heart rate of 250 beats per minute when perching and a whopping 1,250 beats per minute when flying.

volumes chosen for a Pulitzer Prize in nonfiction; and Sarah Morris of Maine. West Virginia does not

have a licensed hummingbird bander living in the state, according to Chartier, and Michigan has only one. Only 80 hummingbird banders are scattered across the country, with a third in the Gulf states, a third in the West and the remainder in the upper eastern portion of the United States, he said. Seventy-seven hummers were

(Continued to next page)

banded the first day near Montrose, while more than 84 were caught and tagged the next day in the process that not only adds to the volume of data accumulated about this bird, but was also an opportunity to train new banders.

"We can learn about hummingbird productivity and whether there are good nesting seasons or bad ones," Chartier said. Sargent said hummingbirds have "great fidelity to nesting sites." And to get the data from the birds, you first need a hummingbird trap known as a Russell trap.

Fine mesh known as "mist netting" is erected in a box-shaped configuration with three sides and a "ceiling," while the fourth side is open. Sugar-water filled hummingbird feeders are placed inside, and after hummers enter the enclosure to drink, they can be captured in the netting, placed into net hosiery bags and taken to a nearby banding station for analysis and banding. The toe portion of a pair of pantyhose is used to gently wrap the bird to restrain it and prevent injury. The bird's wings, bill, tail and weight are measured and the amount of body fat is assessed to see whether the bird has an adequate amount of fat for migration.

Soda straws - yes, the kind you have in a milkshake - also play a part in checking to see if the bird is molting feathers, a sign they've finished nesting and are getting ready to migrate.

"We blow the feathers aside to check the pinfeathers they're growing to replace other feathers that fell out," Chartier said.

Sargent said although an adult male ruby-throated hummingbird has a distinctive red gorget at the base of its neck, the bird has no red feathers. The iridescent qualities of the feathers make the neck feathers red, orange or even black depending upon the angle of light.

Lightweight numbered identification bands so small they can fit around a size 2 knitting needle are carefully fitted into a jig-like hole drilled into the center of jaws on a pair of hummingbird banding pliers. The hole allows the band to be

Rare Central American Hummer Sighted

This past summer, a rare, Central American green violet-eared hummingbird was sighted buzzing around a hummingbird feeder in Terra Alta.

West Virginia, along with most most states on the East coast, is usually home for only the ruby-throated hummingbird, so this sighting was an extreme rarity. The green violet-eared hummingbird is one of the larger hummers and measures four inches in length. Normally this bird calls Panama and Central America its home and this is the first time one was seen in the Mountain State.

There have been a few documented occurrences of this rare hummer in North Carolina and

closed safely around the hummingbird's leg without injury.

The bands, each marked with a letter followed by five numerals for a code exclusive to each bird, are provided by U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Chartier said. Sargent said the bands are so small and lightweight that it takes 5,500 of them to equal one ounce in weight.

Each of the birds banded also zoomed away with a temporary souvenir - a dab of waterbased magenta paint on the top of its head. That marking lets banders know the hummer was already tagged, in case it happened to fly back into the Russell trap. "It's non-toxic and wears off in six weeks," Chartier said. Special state and federal permits are needed to band hummers and another one is also necessary to be allowed to apply the paint, he said.

Once a hummer is caught, the entire banding process is brief - it takes about five minutes. "The birds aren't terribly stressed," Chartier said. "We keep them cool or warm as need be and we process them quickly."

All of the data will go to the bird-banding laboratory in Laurel, Md., that's part of the U.S. Geological Survey, Chartier said.

Adult male hummingbirds will start migrating now, while females



A green violet-eared hummer like this stayed in Terra Alta for 55 days.

several in Texas.

This bird was probably blown off course during a severe storm and landed in our state. These tiny birds hardly weigh anything and can be easily tossed about in a storm.

--Jim Fregonara, WVDNR

will take off in a month. The birds, which will winter in South America, can fly 28 hours nonstop in their 580-mile one-way trip across the Gulf of Mexico.

Flight speed can be 30 mph normal speed and 50 mph for escape speed, according to information published by the Sargents. But to do the marathon trip, they have to bulk up their weight.

A hummer's diet is not just nectar from flowers or sugar water from feeders. They also eat tiny arthropods, such as fruit flies, gnats, mosquitos, aphids, spiders and insect eggs. Foraging for insects is done by "hawking" from an exposed perch, gleaning bark and leaves, and robbing spider webs.

The beat of their wings - at 40 to 80 times per second - gives hummingbirds their distinctive "hum" as they buzz like oversized bees through the air. But if you place your ear right up against a stationary hummingbird, its heartbeat sounds like a constant one-tone cat-like purr.

"Their hearts are cylindrical, a powerful muscle and very efficient," Sargent said. Alas, hummers have a relatively short life span - about 80 percent of them die before their second year.

--Reprinted with permission from the Elkins *Inter-Mountain* newspaper.

News Briefs From Around The State

Northern Saw-whet Owl Research

The Northern Saw-whet Owl (NSWO) was recently identified as a species in need of monitoring at a joint meeting of the Northeast and Southeast Partners in Flight working groups. In response to this designation the WVDNR's Wildlife Diversity Program initiated two studies designed to ascertain the distribution and population density of NSWO's in the state.

The first study is a nestbox placement and monitoring program. Sixty-five NSWO nestboxes were constructed and placed in appropriate habitat during the fall of 2002. No NSWO's nested in these boxes in the spring of 2003; this was not a surprise however. Often it takes a few years before nestboxes are used by these birds and this past spring was a low reproductive year for NSWO's as evidenced by the lack of nestbox use across the species range. These nestboxes will continue to be monitored and additional nestboxes will be placed in 2004.

The second study involves the use of audio playback to elicit responses from NSWO breeding pairs. Eight routes were established consisting of 71 audio playback points, NSWO responses were recorded at 9 of these



points in 2003. These routes will be surveyed for the next several years with 5 new routes being added in 2004.

These two surveys will enable biologists to better understand the distribution and population density of this secretive owl in the Mountain State

--Rob Tallman, WVDNR

West Nile Update

To date 24 birds have tested positive for West Nile Virus in the state. These positive cases have been reported from 32 of the state's 55 counties. The mosquito season is winding down and after the first frosts the virus will not be of much concern until next spring.

However, it is still important to notify your local Health Department office if you find a dead bird you believe may have died due to West Nile virus. Keep in mind that in order for the bird to be tested it must have been recovered within 24 hours of the birds death and it *can not* be frozen. For more information log onto <http://www.wvdhhr.org/bph/oehp/sdc/westnile.htm>.

West Virginia Point Count Surveys

This year, 124 point count survey routes (PCS) were run in WV. This includes 1,312 points in 50 of the state's 55 counties. The majority of these points are in mixed mesophytic forests. This habitat is not adequately covered by the Breeding Bird Surveys so we are adding a great deal of data on the birds in this habitat. We have now expanded the PCSs to include other habitats such as wetlands, grasslands and reclaimed strip mines. We are also covering areas of the state where little bird work has been done (Braxton, Grant, Lincoln, Mineral, Mingo and Wood). We hope to continue to expand coverage in WV in 2004.

All of the survey routes are permanent and we expect, with time, to be able to estimate species trends and evaluate bird/habitat associations. We have had requests for information on cerulean, golden-winged, and magnolia warblers, and yellow-bellied sapsuckers. Without the dedicated and talented birders in the state, none of this would be possible.

--Donna Mitchell, WVDNR

Events Not To Miss!

Hanging Rock Raptor Observatory

Mid August - early November - Peter's Mountain, Monroe County. For more information log onto www.hangingrocktower.org or e-mail info@hangingrocktower.org

Northern Saw-whet Owl Banding Station

Early October - early December - Stuart Knob, Randolph County. For more information, contact Kevin Boyle at nightbirdpottery@hotmail.com. Hardworking volunteers needed to assist with mist netting and record-

ing information. Be advised that the hours are in the middle of the night!

Upcoming Bird Count Assistance Needed

Beginning November and varied dates for Christmas Bird Counts (CBC)

Assistance is encouraged with two projects that provide a great deal of bird population information: the WVDNR's Backyard Birdcount which begins in November and the 17 CBCs throughout West Virginia which take place in Dec. or Jan. For more information, contact Rob Tallman: rtallman@dnr.state.wv.us or checkout the DNR website: www.wvdnr.gov



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Editors: Rob Tallman and Nanci Bross-Fregonara
P.O. Box 67 Elkins, WV 26241
304-637-0245
rtallman@dnr.state.wv.us
www.wvdnr.gov



National Partners in Flight News

North American Landbird Conservation Plan

The final draft of the Continental Plan is out for review and may be downloaded from http://www.birds.cornell.edu/pifCapeMay/PIF_Final_Draft.pdf. If this does not work well and you prefer a CD, contact Ken Rosenberg or Terry Rich. Snail-mail and e-mail comments should be sent **by 31 October 2003** to both Terry and Ken.

Terry Rich, Partners in Flight National Coordinator
U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1387 S. Vinnell Way
Boise, ID 83709
terry_rich@fws.gov

--Ken Rosenberg, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, kvr2@cornell.edu

Sustainable Coffee Gains Support

As evidence of corporate America's new commitment to environmental

and social responsibility, sustainably produced coffee certified by the Rainforest Alliance is hitting the mainstream. At select Citigroup headquarters around the nation, employees can savor 100% Rainforest Alliance Certified coffee. This cooperative effort was spearheaded by the global financial services company in cooperation with worldwide managed services provider ARAMARK and specialty coffee supplier Java City. Recently, Millstone, a Procter & Gamble brand, introduced its new Rainforest Alliance Certified Signature Roast line, together with a Fair Trade and Cup of Excellence lines. Procter & Gamble is supporting the efforts of coffee farmers in Latin America to both care for their workers and for the rainforest environment in which they grow their coffee. The announcement follows a number of other recent developments: This summer, three of the world's largest

coffee traders, Volcafe, Ecom and Neumann signed memorandums of understanding with the Rainforest Alliance to promote sustainably produced coffee.

--Kristen Earls (kearls@ra.org)

Important Economic Reports Available

New economic reports on wildlife viewing, hunting and fishing are now available free at www.southwickassociates.com. The latest reports posted include the 2001 Economic Benefits of Watchable Wildlife Recreation in Colorado, the 2001 Economic Contributions of Wildlife Watching in Florida, and the 2001 Economic Contributions of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Watching in Texas. Additional information will be available soon for Missouri and other states.

—Rob Southwick
(rob@southwickassociates.com)



THE WV PARTNERS IN FLIGHT
WORKING GROUP
P.O. BOX 67
ELKINS, WV 26241

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